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ABSTRACT

English instructors often find themselves in a position of upholding what they realize is an institutional form of racism and classism. Such "standards" presuppose a "correct" language form, one that is often stultifying and unchanging. In today's college classrooms, many English as a Second Language students appear whose intelligence is unquestioned, but whom many teachers expect to write in solely American "academic English" convention. In "Talking Back," bell hooks relates that despite a lack of Black women teachers in English departments and despite overt and institutional racism in the predominantly White classrooms in which she was a student, she determined not to become an oppressor. English instructors must read student papers as whole written thoughts worthy of consideration, re-see their visions of language, and understand the hidden agendas of language use just as they have come to see the hidden curriculum in schools. They must realize, as the movie "American Tongues" points out, that all students come from dialectical backgrounds, some of these backgrounds having very entrenched systems of thought. Contains 43 references. (TB)

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Ethical Issues in Language Use

We often still find ourselves in situations in which language and writing are used for "gatekeeping," in a position of upholding what we often may not realize is a form of institutional racism and classism--a situation that Hephzibah Roskelly describes as exclusion of and silencing of students because of race or class position, or gender, in the name of departmental "standards." Such "standards" presuppose a "correct" language form, one that is often stultifying and unchanging. All of us have agonized over what writer Dorothy Allison calls "the shattering of self" that comes from rejection of background and the self that is imposed by seeing language use only in means of a "correct" form. How can we as teachers of language to active subjects avoid or minimize the pain that Allison and other writers describe? One means is to incorporate into teaching essays that discuss language issues.

I am reminded of the ESL students who appear in my classrooms, whose intelligence is unquestioned, but whom many teachers expect to write with solely American "academic English" conventions. When I taught in Georgia at a regional university, one of the students in a writing/literary genres class was a young Ethiopian woman, multilingual, for whom English was a third

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or fourth language. She had been educated in French schools: the conventions that she used were often continental. Her writing and thinking was beautiful: I could not have asked for finer writing, yet I felt compelled to warn her about the use of certain spellings and conventions that appeared in her essays because I knew the make-up of that department and that any deviation from what were considered "acceptable conventions" was punished severely.

At that same university I taught developmental studies writing and I witnessed first hand the destructive power of "standards," and "grading for error": the fear under which students often attempt to function when they write about their own ideas or about literature. For example, a student writes:

> English is a subject that I do not excel in. Since I'm not very good in this subject I tend not to care about it; I can say that I'm really not interested. I do however understand that I need English for my future. That without English I cannot be very successful. This is why I am willing to learn, and roll with the punches (Snyder 1).

Most of the student writers who entered those developmental studies classrooms were African American. Unfortunately, often simply grading for error and "correctness" to enforce standards bulwarked the institutional racism already present.

In her 1973 essay "White English in Blackface, or Who Do I Be?" Geneva Smitherman writes

> educators from K-Grad. School bees debating whether: (1)

> blacks should learn and use only standard white English. . . (2) blacks should command both dialects, i.e., be bidialectal. . .(3) blacks should be allowed (??????) to use standard Black English. . . . The appropriate choice having everything to do with American political reality, which is usually ignored, and nothing to do with the educational process, which is usually claimed. . . . In the reading classrooms of today, what we bees needin' is teachers with the proper attitudinal orientation who thus can distinguish actual reading problems from mere dialect differences. Or take the writing of an essay. The only percentage in writing a paper with WE spelling, punctuation, and usage is maybe in eliciting a positive attitudinal response from a prescriptivist middle-class-aspirant teacher. Dig on the fact that sheer "correctness" does not a good writer make (205, 206).

belle hooks, Barbara Mellix, and Rachael Jones all speak of the violence language has created in their lives. In Talking Back, hooks relates that despite a lack of black women teachers in English Departments and despite both overt and institutional racism in the predominantly white classrooms in which she was a student, she was determined not to become an "oppressor," though

> For some of us, failure, failing, being failed began to look like a positive alternative, a way out, a solution. This was especially true for those students who felt they were suffering mentally, who felt that they would never be able

to recover a sense of wholeness or well-being. (59).

Barbara Mellix writes in "From Outside, In" of the process of "finding her way around" in "appropriate" language "in the concentrated process of becoming" and of "imagin[ing] myself as a part of the culture of that language, and therefore someone free to manage that language, to take liberties with it" (200, 201). Mellix discusses not only time, but pain in this process.

> Each experience of writing was like standing naked and revealing my imperfection, my "otherness." . . . . I had the sensation of being split in two, part of me going into a future the other part didn't believe possible. As that person, the student writer at the moment, I was essentially mute. I could not--in the process of composing--use the language of the old me, yet I couldn't imagine myself in the language of "others" (197).

A black woman, Rachel Jones has been accused of having "white pipes" (202). In her "What's Wrong with Black English," Jones discusses the political realities of employment and audience.

> I have not formed a personal political ideology, but I do know this: it hurts me to hear black children use black English, knowing that they will be at yet another disadvantage in an educational system already full of stumbling blocks. . . . (203, 204).

We need to understand the history and need for codified language usages in Black language systems--contexts and states of being

transcribed in a sort of shorthand because, as James Baldwin points out, being Black in a white-dominated American society was often dangerous to life itself. We need to understand that Latino, Chicano students, and Asian-American students use differing linguistic forms and create language. Gloria Anzaldua writes:

> For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo, for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? (12).

In her "My Mother's English" Amy Tan writes

> Lately I've been giving more thought to the kind of English that my mother speaks. Like others I have described it to people as broken or fractured English, but I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it than broken, as if it were damaged or needed to be fixed. . . .

We must read our students' papers as whole written thoughts worthy of consideration, re-see our visions of language, and understand the hidden agendas of language use just as we have come to see the hidden curriculum in schools. We must realize, as the movie *American Tongues* points out, that all students come from dialectical backgrounds, some of these backgrounds very

entrenched in thought. For example, in Appalachia where I now teach culture is and has been primarily oral. "Storytelling" is a part of everyday speech, although writing students often do not realize this. The language systems used have are colorful and the words have a wonderful flavor, in some cases so colorful, in fact, that in classroom discussion in the first semester that I have to ask some students from some remote areas of southeastern Kentucky to repeat what they have said slowly so that I can understand. Students here are protective of the language they employ because that language has so often been criticized.

When "outsiders" came into the area in large numbers during the "War on Poverty," the "archaic Elizabethan forms" of the language were made much of. To many of the people of Appalachia, this attention to language was simply one more way of making difference, one more way that outsiders could prove their world superior, one more way of distancing a people, making them "quaint" objects for observation rather than travelling between worlds in context. Hostility developed to the use of any different language form, and the expectation of "correctness" increased that hostility.

All entering students in my classes view the movie *American Tongues*. The diagnostic essay I employ in my classes, an essay that can then be revised, examines language. Because a section of the movie was shot in Kentucky, students often comment on *American Tongues*. Usually the comments are not about the man who served in the armed forces who realized it was he and not the

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rest of his platoon in basic training who "talked funny," and who says he could recognize a Kentucky accent anywhere in the world. This interview is set in a beautiful mountain scene, dirt road, a daughter on horseback, green and verdant woods in the background: the dream of the city-dweller who would like to escape to the country. They do not comment on the section in which a folklorist discusses communication in Appalachian Kentucky. Instead, they are outraged by a flea market scene in which a woman, a baby on her hip, is buying cowboy boots for her husband. This scene, they feel, simply reinforces the stereotypes about poverty and lack of education in Kentucky.

Students write about travels out of the area, about being singled out in other areas for the way they speak and asked where they are from. They discuss the kind of prejudice they feel as a result of language use. It is no surprise to the students here that people are judged by how they write and speak.

There is, as in all language variation, beauty to the language of Appalachia. Discussions that do not create hierarchies of language are very important here, for in this area where many students are first generation college students whose parents may not have finished high school and where family ties are very important, the power of "correctness" to fragment the student, separate the student from her family is a great risk. We discuss purpose and audience for writing and speaking. We discuss the "voice from nowhere" segment of *American Voices*, a segment in which Polly Holliday discusses her work as the "voice

of directory assistance." Talking of "academic" or "standard" English as one form of language used for specific purposes again "takes the heat" off students, and allows students to interrogate and write about experiences with language. It allows James McDonald to write in lyrical prose about his pride in language that is his heritage from his ancestors, as much a heritage as the farmland in the valley at the foot of a green and beautiful mountain. It allows Regina Blevins to write out the folklore of her family, realizing that the stories her family has told her are not "just old stories," but the history and lives of people. It allows Marie Elam to tell her own story, the story of a woman who grew up amidst hard work, taking on much responsibility young:

> Mama had to work out on the farm a lot so I was taught to watch and care for the other children. I was also taught to cook at a very early age. I don't know how old I was, but I can remember Mama pulling a chair over to the old wood cook stove and standing me in it and showing me how to cook. I was not even big enough to see the top of the stove without a chair or something to stand on. My other duties were to feed the boys and keep them diapered and inside so they wouldn't get hurt or lost. I would fill a gallon jug with water every so often and carry it to the fields where my parents were working in the hot sun trying to make a living.

Marie fulfilled her parents dream of high school graduation, graduation at sixteen, going directly to work to help her family.

A non-traditional student, Marie also writes of her marriage and her hopes for her children. She wants their life to be and makes their life easier than was hers. She writes of her pride in her husband and her sons, of pride in all her family members. Discussing language and education allowed Marie to write of her father:

> My father, a tall slender gent in his 60s, has thinning hair and a worn rugged exterior look. He has a third grade education in school and uses words like holler, crick, ain't and so on. Just to talk to him a few minutes you would think he is just a country man who only knows hard work grubbing or plowing with a horse. But this man I am discussing is one of the smartest men I know.
>
> Walking through the woods on a pretty sunshiny day with spring in the air, spring flowers in bloom and the birds chirping, he never sees or hears these things: he is constantly looking at the trees. When he leaves these woods he can almost tell you exactly how much lumber can be cut from these trees. . . . At his blacksmith shop he can mold metal within millimeters or inches to fit a particular project he is working on. He turns the wheel on the black blower machine and blows air on the already red fire. . . . When he knows it is hot enough he stops the blower and removes the metal from the fire. . . . and pounds it into shape with a hammer. . . . This loving old gentleman can tell you how to plant a garden. . . . On the riverbank the

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> fish sure have a hard time with him. . . . Dad may only have a third grade education and he doesn't use proper grammar, but he is one of the smartest men I know and I have seen a lot of educated people through my work. I bet he could teach them a few things.

Writing is exploration and expression of the self, and student writing needs to be considered to be "real" writing from a person who is capable of thinking and expressing complex ideas. "Correctness" comes with practice, and error must be expected for growth to occur. Student writers need to be given the respect necessary for them to be able to express themselves, the same respect that all writers are given: student writers need to express their own perceptions and views of the world, view they bring with them from, as Margaret Laurence says, home, where their eyes were formed. Perhaps one of my students says this better than can I.

> When a person is taught something at home, he or she tends to take it to heart. So we find that a person is left in a world of confusion when he or she is told what she or he learned at home is wrong. . . . I try to talk using the perfect English. After I started doing this I felt as if I had lost a part of who I was and became very confused. . . . why are other languages not talked about more in school or anywhere? . . . It is okay to say a person uses a word wrong in a paper . . . but do not just mark it wrong, talk about the difference in it.

Or this from another student.

> Language is something that should be expressed straight from the heart, and it should have no boundaries whether it be a native or standard, humans should have the right to speak in a way which is effective to them.

What is true in the composition classroom is equally true in the literature classroom, and in life. To appreciate language and literature, students need to be exposed to a wide range of styles of writing, choices, and cultural, social, and political viewpoints, and if bilinguality and multilinguality as well as multiculturalism are truly seen as celebration: if language forms are not privileged in hierarchical orders and privileged, students may be able to lose their language anxiety and to not to see language as "who they are," as Bharati Mukherjee points out is the case with so many solely English speakers and writers, but rather as expressions of ideas for varying audiences and purposes, and as a means of revisioning the world and recreating the self through story.

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